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The research of Subjective Sense of Happiness in Senior Preschoolers

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to examine the perceptions of happiness and to identify the level of subjective happiness among children of senior preschool age. These parameters were studied in their connection with such personal characteristics, as manifestation of extraversion/introversion, anxiety level, willingness to cooperate and the feeling of subjective happiness in mothers of preschoolers. The study found that comparing with children who sometimes feel unhappy, happy children demonstrate a lower anxiety level and a higher degree of extraversion manifestation. Mothers of happy children feel happier than those of children who sometimes feel unhappy.

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1. Introduction

Happiness has become a research field for foreign psychology since the 1970s. Because of the complex nature of the "happiness" category M. Seligman introduced the idea of "subjective well-being" as its scientific synonym [1]. Both terms are equivalent and are widespread in modern psychology [2]. The latest decades have seen a spectacular rise of interest in the problem of happiness in Russian science, too. Most of the researchers involved in this topic agree that happiness is a subjective feeling. It must be viewed as a complex construct that consists of several main components – cognitive (satisfaction with life in general) and affective (the presence of frequent positive emotions and an occasional manifestation of negative emotions). Consequently, each of these components includes a number of more specific elements, for example, life satisfaction involves job satisfaction, family satisfaction, satisfaction with recreation, health, financial situation, social status, etc. [2], [3], [4].

In addition to external factors of happiness (socio-economic, demographic, ecological) it is important to consider internal reasons and determinants of happiness such as temperament, personality characteristics, world perception and resilience. There is no universal recipe for happiness for all people; a subjective well-being is made of a mixture of all these factors, unique for each individual [2]. A human being feels, understands and evaluates the level of personal happiness-unhappiness, well-being-distress as a holistic experience, guided by his own criteria [5].

Research results show that although life satisfaction at the moment can be impacted by a person's emotional state, specific life events, and even weather conditions, the level of the subjective feeling of happiness is a relatively stable indicator for each human being. This phenomenon can be accounted for, to a large degree, by personal characteristics [2], [4]. The Diener E., Seligman M. research of students' "Big Five" personal factors and their correlation with happiness [6] showed that happy people are characterized by a low level of neuroticism, a high degree of extraversion and willingness to cooperate. There is a certain personal predisposition to experience some level of emotion and it can be measured independently from the assessment of the current state.

M. Seligman offered a formula for a sustainable, lasting happiness: $H = S + C + V$, where H is happiness, S is a biological set point which remains stable throughout the whole life and makes at least 50%, C is living conditions, such as family, children, religion, everyday activities which determine 10% of happiness, V is voluntary actions or choices we make daily, they amount to 40% and they are conscious, intended and effort requiring [1].

The analysis of this formula shows that from early childhood some children are "doomed" to feel happier while others are predetermined to feel less happy. When a child is immature and can't consciously develop personal qualities in him, his happiness will be determined genetically and highly dependent on his family, first and foremost, on his mother. In reality from his early childhood the child imitates his parents' emotions, learns the emotional reactions of people he is in constant contact with [4]. If she is happy, a mother usually experiences positive emotions exhibiting them to other people and, in the first place, to her child. As a result, the child gets a positive emotional experience, which leads to the formation of "basic trust" in the world; he is open to interaction, benevolent, as his expectations of contacts with people, the world at large, are positively marked. A study on a sample of mothers and their teenage children showed that their subjective feelings of happiness correlated [7].

As far as Russian empirical studies of the subjective feeling of happiness in preschoolers are concerned, it is important to say that there's been little research on the subject, in most cases it is only possible to find personal opinions about it expressed by teachers, psychologists and parents. What do preschool children think about happiness? How much are they happy? What does their feeling of happiness depend on? In 2001 Zyryanova [8] made a study into perceptions of happiness among children of senior preschool age. The study showed that 71% of the children believed they were happy, 12 % were only occasionally happy, 15% answered they didn't think they were happy. The same study in 2010 showed that the rate of children who thought they were happy remained relatively stable (72%).

The purpose of our research was to analyze perceptions of happiness, to determine a subjective sense of happiness in senior preschool children and to describe its correlation with such individual and personal characteristics as manifestation of extroversion/introversion, anxiety levels, willingness to cooperate, as well as a subjective feeling of happiness in their mothers. We propose two hypotheses. The first one is that children, who feel happy, unlike those who sometimes feel unhappy, demonstrate a lower anxiety level, while their extraversion level and willingness to cooperate are higher. The second hypothesis is that mothers of happy children feel happier than those of "unhappy" children.

2. Method

The participants in the experiment included 86 children, aged 5-6 (44 boys and 42 girls) and their mothers. All the children attend preschools in Yekaterinburg (Russia). The methods used in the experiment were as follows: 1) An interview based on 4 questions: What is happiness? What people are happy? Are you happy? What do you need to be happy? (Zyryanova) [8]. 2) "The Ladder" ranging method enabling a child to estimate his level of happiness. The children were given a piece of paper with a picture of 3 ladder steps. The first step was entitled "unhappy", the second "sometimes happy", the third "always happy". The children had to range their life activities according to the steps. 3) The anxiety test. (Temple R., Dorki M., Amen V.) [9]. 4) The "Do it Together" method (Kalinina R.R.) [9]. The method evaluates a child's willingness to cooperate. 5) The method of expert evaluation of extraversion/introversion manifestation. The experts were chosen from among the children's parents. The experts were given 20 behavioral manifestations and qualities from "The Eysenck Personality Inventory" (10 manifestations related to extraversion, the other 10 to introversion). The parents were to check the presence of these manifestations in their children's behavior. 6) The 10-point scale of subjective happiness (for mothers).

3. Results and discussion

The "Ladder" study and the interview showed 70% of children surveyed always felt happy, 30% answered that they sometimes were happy, 30% said that they sometimes were happy and sometimes unhappy. The research didn't reveal any children who said they were unhappy.

All the children answered the question "What is happiness?", although the question is very complicated even for adults. 35% of the answers had to do with their experience of positive emotions ("This happens when a person smiles", "When you are happy with everything", "When your heart melts"), with a family – 25% ("When father and mother aren't at work", "When grandma and granddaddy come around"). 10% of preschool children associate their happiness with things material ("When you've been given a present", "When you have the Superman's costume"), with personal achievements – 8% ("When you learn how to do something that you couldn't do before"), with holidays – 4% ("This is a New Year", "This is a birthday"), with relations with people, duties – 4% ("When you help others", "When a person is kind to everybody"). 8% couldn't describe happiness with differentiation ("When everything is fine", "When many good things happen").

Among the answers to the question "What kind of people are happy?" 37.5% of the children answered that happy people were those who experienced positive emotions, people who had families – 14.6%, kind, good people – 14.6%, successful people – 10% ("they succeed in everything", "they do a lot of useful things"), people who received presents – 8%.

The majority of children (70.8%), answering the question "What do you need to be happy?", mentioned specific dreams ("To go to Paris", "To visit a puppet theatre"). 14.6% thought they needed positive emotions, 10% said it was love and approval ("I need a hug", "When my mother and father praise me") and so on and so forth.

Based on the interview answers and "the Ladder" ranging methodology, all the children were divided into 2 groups: the first group was "happy" (60 preschoolers), the second one was "sometimes happy" (26 preschoolers).

The data describing the number of participants with different anxiety levels and the number of "happy" and "occasionally happy" children are given in Table 1.

Table 1. The number of participants with high anxiety levels

Sample categories	The number of participants with high anxiety levels (%)		
	Low level	Middle level	High level
Total sample	4.7	68.6	26.7
"Happy" children	6.7	86.6	6.7
"Occasionally happy" children	0	73	27

In general, children of 5-6 years of age manifest a middle anxiety level. Only 4 children from the "happy" group of the sample have a low anxiety level. The comparative analysis of anxiety level in both groups showed a statistically verified higher anxiety level among children who feel unhappy ($p < 0.05$, Mann-Whitney U test).

The maximum anxiety level in both groups was registered in situations dealing with child-adult relationships ("The child with parents", "Rebuke", "Ignore"). A significantly lower anxiety level was found in drawings, dealing with child-child relationships.

According to the expert evaluation of extraversion/introversion manifestation given by the children's parents half of the sample group exhibit extroversion manifestations. On top of that, most extroverts were found to be in the "happy" group. The data describing the number of participants with varying degrees of extraversion/introversion manifestation, as well as the number of "happy" and "occasionally happy" children are given in Table 2.

Table 2. The number of participants with varying degrees of extraversion/introversion manifestation

Sample categories	The number of participants with varying degrees of extraversion/introversion manifestation (%)		
	Children with domineering extraversion features	Children with domineering introversion features	Children with equal extraversion/introversion features
Total sample	51.2	22.1	26.7
"Happy" children	65	13.3	21.7
"Occasionally happy" children	19.2	42.3	38.5

The comparative analysis of degrees of extroversion/introversion manifestation among children from both groups showed a statistically verified lower degree of extroversion manifestation among the children who sometimes feel unhappy ($p < 0.05$, Mann-Whitney U test).

The study didn't show any verified difference in the willingness to cooperate among preschool children in both groups. The willingness to cooperate includes a desire to interact, to communicate while doing things together. This means partners are able to coordinate their actions taking into consideration one another's positions, as well as to control their negative reactions. All these skills and abilities are in their initial development stage at the preschool age. However, such individual psychological features as extroversion and anxiety levels are already well established at this age because they are caused genetically.

In addition to a child's genetic predisposition to happiness, we believe it will be correct to assume that the mother's level of happiness directly correlates with that of her child at the preschool age. A comparative analysis of subjective happiness in mothers of "happy" children and those of children who sometimes feel unhappy,

according to the 10-point scale, shows their verified difference ($p < 0.05$, Mann-Whitney U test). The mothers of happy children are happier than those whose children sometimes feel unhappy.

4. Conclusion

The study showed that children, who feel happy manifest a lower anxiety level and a higher introversion level than those who sometimes feel unhappy. The sample group of children of 5-6 years of age proved the data provided by Diener E., Seligman M., describing happy people as having a low level of neuroticism and a high degree of extraversion. Consequently, a subjective happiness level is, to a certain degree, determined by a number of stable individual personal characteristics. The assumption about a higher degree of willingness to cooperate among happy children wasn't proved. This parameter's figures proved to be insufficiently high for most of the participants. This can be accounted for by the low level of communicative skill development in children of 5-6 years of age.

It was proved that mothers of happy kids are happier than those with kids who sometimes feel unhappy. Thus, it is critical to understand that the happiness of mothers is crucial for that of their children. Happy mothers' positive emotions directly lead to children's positive emotional experience, and form an affective component of the sense of subjective happiness (frequent positive emotions and seldom negative emotions).

The results of the study are very important as they help us to understand the dynamics of subjective happiness and the effect of some factors on our holistic perception of happiness in different age periods.

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